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OF

O X F O R D.

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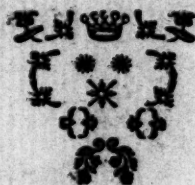
O F

O X F O R D,

On S U N D A Y, the Seventh of N O V E M B E R, 1779.

By G E O R G E B E L L A S, D. D.

RECTOR OF YATTENDON, AND VICAR OF BASILDEN,
BERKSHIRE.



L O N D O N:

Printed by F. BLYTH, QUEEN'S-HEAD-PASSAGE, PATER-NOSTER-ROW,
for N. CONANT, in FLEET-STREET: Sold also by MR. PARKER, in
OXFORD; MR. KNIGHT, at READING; and MR. WILLIS, at NEWBURY.

THE ROMAN

PREACHED BEFORE THE

UNIVERSITY

OF

OXFORD

ON SUNDAY the seventh of November, 1777.

By GEORGE BELL, D.D.

RECTOR OF YATTON, VICAR OF HARTLEY,



LONDON:

Printed by E. Bury, Queen-Street, near St. Dunstons Church,
for M. Cox, in Fleet-Street; and by W. Bland, in
Oxford, at the Sign of the Three Kings, in the High Street.

2 S A M U E L, CHAP. XXIV. VERSES 11, 12, 13.

When David was up in the morning, the word of the Lord came unto the prophet Gad, David's Seer, saying,

Go and say unto David, thus saith the Lord, I offer thee three things; choose thee one of them, that I may do it unto thee.

So Gad came to David and told him, and said unto him—Shall seven years of famine come unto thee in thy land?—Or wilt thou flee three months before thine enemies, while they pursue thee?—Or that there be three days pestilence in thy land?—Now advise, and see what answer I shall return to him that sent me.

OF all the histories which are extant, there is none more distinguished for a variety of remarkable transactions than that which is left us of the Jewish nation, in the books of the Old Testament; so that if we were to look upon this part of the Bible as a mere human composition, and as having no relation to the forming

the lives and manners of any other country, yet we might fairly insist upon it, that it is the most curious, the most entertaining history that has ever yet appeared. But we Christians are assured, by St. Paul, that it is a subject in which we are much interested: the things concerning the prosperity and adversity of the Israelites were written for our admonition and instruction; so that we are not only invited to read the books in which they are recorded, upon account of the delight which attends the perusal, but we are commanded so to do, that we may learn from thence most useful lessons of a good life.

THE passage of which the text is a part, as it is as remarkable an one as any in the whole Jewish history, so it will afford us very profitable reflections.

WITHOUT farther preface, therefore, I shall first enquire what it was David had done to deserve so heavy a punishment as either of the three, one of which he is here called upon to submit to.

2dly, I SHALL observe what the nature of his crime was in doing what in this chapter is related of him.

3dly, I SHALL shew that Divine Providence is concerned in the disposal of national condition, assigning to a people adversity or prosperity, according to the supreme will.

AND lastly, enquire when a nation now in these days may be judged guilty of the like crime with David's, if such a numbering of forces was to be made by them.

AND first then, I am to enquire what it was that David had done
to

to deserve so heavy a punishment as either of the three, one of which he is here called upon to submit to.

WHAT these punishments were, you have heard,—Seven years famine, three months defeat from the enemies of Israel, or three days pestilence. Either of them undoubtedly a very grievous curse, and therefore we may justly presume, before we examine the matter, that the sin which David had committed was a very grievous one.

Now as to the fact itself, abstracted from the motive which led David to it, we find from the beginning of this chapter, that it was no more than numbering the people of Israel and Juda.

DAVID said unto Joab, the captain of the host, which was with him—Go now through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan even to Beersheba, and number ye the people, that I may know the number of the people.—Accordingly after having endeavoured (but in vain) to dissuade the king from this project, it is said, that Joab and the captains of the host went out from the presence of the king to number the people of Israel. And when they had gone through all the land, they came to Jerusalem at the end of nine months and twenty days. And Joab gave up the sum of the number of the people unto the king; and there were in Israel eight hundred thousand valiant men that drew the sword: and the men of Juda were five hundred thousand men.

THIS then was the fact, considered barely in itself.—And can it be so heinous a transgression for a king to take a review of his forces, and to see what number of persons fit for battle he has in his kingdom? Is it not rather a matter of just rejoicing, and ground of blessing God, that there is so great a military strength in Israel and Juda?—The resolution of this question is what we come now to give in consideration of the
second

second particular, which was to observe the nature of David's sin in thus numbering the people.

In order to shew this, it is necessary to take notice of the difference of God's providential dispensations in regard to the Israelites and other kingdoms.

WHOEVER looks into the history of the rise and fall of nations, will generally find, that their success has borne some proportion to their force and power, and to the conduct and ability of their leaders. But with the Israelites, who from slaves in Egypt became a great and powerful people, the case was not so. God had chosen Jacob for his peculiar people, and Israel for his own possession. He had taken their defence upon himself, and would not allow that their success was in any wise to be ascribed to human strength.

No one of the inspired writers has left us more full declarations of this doctrine than David himself, though in the instance of his conduct which we are now examining he so little attended to it. The people (*i. e.* the Israelites, says he) gat not the land in possession by their own sword, neither was it their own arm that helped them: but thy right hand and thine arm, and the light of thy countenance, because thou hadst a favour unto them. When we read this and other like passages, we are apt, perhaps, to look upon them only as acknowledgments of God's general providence in the affairs of the world, and not sufficiently to attend to the historical truth which they contain.

It is undoubtedly true, that all success may in a just sense be ascribed to God; and that it is he who giveth victory unto kings. But yet he ordinarily makes use of natural means, and it is no offence to his Providence that princes enlist their thousands of horse and foot to secure themselves

selves and their dominions. But with the Israelites it was otherwise: they were never so weak as when they made themselves strong; never so certainly ruined as when their force was great enough to create in them a confidence in themselves. Nay so tender was God of his honour in this respect, and so concerned to justify his promise to defend Israel in the eyes of the world, that he would not always permit natural causes to interfere in their deliverance, lest the people should grow doubtful to whom they should ascribe their victories. Thus when Gideon stood up to deliver the people from the Midianites, he raised an army of thirty-two thousand men; but God refused to go forth with so great an host, and the reason given for it is this: The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into thy hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me saying, mine own hand hath saved me.

ACCORDINGLY the thirty-two thousand were reduced to three hundred, and by them the host of Midian was overthrown.

AGREEABLY to this doctrine, it is very much to be remarked, and no one can read attentively this part of the Bible history without remarking, that during the whole period of time, from the coming out of Egypt to the end of David's reign, the people of Israel never suffered for want of force and strength in war.—They were often punished (as they often deserved it) for their idolatry; but whenever they repented and turned to God, their deliverance did not wait for want of forces.—Troops few in number and seemingly unfit for action, supported neither by chariots nor by horsemen, proved an overmatch for royal armies. This may be verified from the instance of Gideon above-mentioned, from that of Baruch, Jephtha, and Samuel, and of all others called forth by God to save his people.

FROM this account of the particular circumstances the Israelites were under, in regard to the peculiar protection of God, we may fairly collect what we are enquiring after, namely, the nature of David's crime in numbering the people.

THIS fact of his shewed a distrust of that particular providence which had all along so remarkably distinguished itself in defence of Israel. Had he kept up the truly religious spirit of confidence in God which he once possessed, and which a king of Israel one would have thought could never have parted with, he would have been under no concern about the number of his forces; he would have trusted God with the cause he had undertaken, and which he had constantly, and in David's case in a very particular manner, discharged with fidelity. But God, who had so often mightily delivered David his servant from the battle that was against him, suffered him to submit for a while to the most dangerous enemy man can meet with, his own heart's lust. He forgot, as he once complained of his countrymen, God his Saviour, who had done so great things for him. He who was so well versed in the law, yet in this instance attended to it no more than he had done to the sixth and seventh commandment in the case of Uriah. The law and the promise were plain and express, if he had not been blinded by his own vanity.

WHEN thou goest to battle against thine enemies, and seest chariots and horses, and a people more than thou, be not afraid of them, for the Lord thy God is with thee. Happy had it been for him and his people, had he remembered the pious doctrine of his beloved brother Jonathan,—there is no restraint to the Lord, to save by many or by few. Happy had it been for him had he then remembered what he once said to the giant of the Philistines—thou comest to me with a sword and with a spear and with a shield, but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of Hosts,
I will

I will smite thee that all the earth may know (not that I am superior to thee in the art of fighting, *but that there is a God.*

HAPPY had it been for him and his people had he taken care to have been consistent with himself, and preserved the same pious mind in which he uttered those many strong declarations of his trust in God, and disclaiming a confidence in human force, which we find in the book of Psalms.—There is no king that can be saved by the multitude of an host, —I will not trust in my bow,—it is not my sword that shall help me.—It is thou, O God, that savest us from our enemies and puttest them to confusion that hate us.—Give us help from trouble, for vain is the help of man. But such was the frailty of this great king, when God in anger withdrew from him his holy spirit and gave him up to himself, that he left off to think wisely—he numbered the people, he distrusted God.

WHEN we look upon the fact in this view, all difficulties concerning the relation of it are plainly solved. If David, who had so many strong reasons for putting his trust in God, shewed by this fact a confidence in his own and his people's strength, and a distrust in that Providence which had been so constant a guard of Israel, then we see clearly that this action was not, as if taken by itself without considering the state of the Jews in relation to God's peculiar government, it may at first sight appear, a light thing, a thing of no moment, but a very grievous sin. We now see a plain reason for the sorrow and contrition of David, mentioned in the verse immediately preceeding the text: And David's heart smote him, after he had numbered the people: and David said unto the Lord, I have sinned greatly in that I have done. Nor are we surpris'd at the importunate endeavours of Joab and the captains of the host, to dissuade the king from his purpose, since it appears to be so great a transgression. Nor can we help seeing how properly God is said to have moved David to it—because his anger was kindled against Israel he permitted Satan to
 provoke

provoke him to it. What suggestion more fit to come from Satan, the great tempter of mankind to their ruin, than a distrust of God—from Satan the first of all created beings that we know of, who departed from his duty to God, and had the ambition to attempt to be his own absolute lord and prince.

AFTER what has been said, we need not doubt but that Divine Providence is concerned in the disposal of national condition, assigning to a people adversity or prosperity according to the supreme will.

WHOEVER is convinced that it is God who gave existence to the world, cannot doubt but that he is also the governor of all things in it, nothing being more unreasonable than to suppose he should produce the world into being, and then leave it to fluctuate without guidance. And how unequal soever Providence may appear in the present state with regard to particular persons, yet upon the whole of things its equality will be confirmed, and the Judge of the world be known to have done right. They who confine their views to this life, look but on a very inconsiderable part of man's existence: he is a creature not of threescore or fourscore years but of eternity. What then if the good man labours under temporal difficulties, and the wicked man prospers and makes a figure, Providence will notwithstanding be justified, if we suppose their respective behaviour and condition to be exactly taken into the account, and another life to succeed; a life of never-ending happiness or misery to be allotted according as the case of each requires. But as to national prosperity or adversity, these, we may venture to assert, will always be correspondent to national virtue or wickedness. This is a conclusion which the wisdom of all ages, and the experience of all histories affirms to us. If we look into the record of a state, we shall find that its peace and security depend upon the truth, justice, temperance and charity of its members. These blessed dispositions always render a people flourishing and happy, and the opposite

opposite vices are as surely productive of misery and ruin. 'Tis true, a wicked man is not always miserable, but a wicked nation can never be happy. Let us imagine a land to be entirely inhabited by men void of all moral principles (characters which some of us are not strangers to) what prospect could there be of ease and safety? It would be against the natural tendency of things to expect those blessings. A republic of villains must necessarily vex, injure and disquiet one another; they are miserable by constitution.

BUT besides this consideration that, according to the natural tendency of things, national virtue is its own reward, and national vice its own punishment, it ought to be observed that with regard to public communities of men, the justice of Divine Providence cannot appear but in present and temporal dispensations. Private persons are subject to a future judgment, and therefore the justice of God may be fully executed in recompensing their behaviour, tho' the recompence be deferred to another life. But a nation, considered as a body of men united together in society, can subsist only in this world, and consequently national behaviour can be rewarded or punished only in this world.

AFTER what has been said, in order to shew the nature of David's crime in numbering the people, and that Divine Providence is concerned in the disposal of national condition, assigning to a people prosperity or adversity according to the supreme will, it will not be difficult to answer the next enquiry;—when may a nation now in these days be judged guilty of the like crime, if such a numbering of forces was to be made by them?

To make wars lawful the causes must be just: they must be undertaken for the necessary defence and security of society. Wars of ambition are direct murders. When battles are fought by a nation merely to shew the world how terrible they are, how many men they are able to slay, how

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many slaves to make, how many families to drive from their peaceable habitations, how much mischief and misery they can bring upon mankind, these wars are founded upon false notions of glory; and though the splendor of success may dazzle mankind for a while, and palliate the motive of an unjust enterprize; yet if a sad reverse of fortune should happen, as by God's providence has often happened, to check the impetuous career of insolent and vain-glorious ambition, the whole world rejoices to see the oppressor humbled and cast down, and exults with hearts full of gratitude to that Being in whose sight the rights of humanity are ever precious. Such were the insatiable and arrogant schemes of that late politic and ambitious monarch Lewis the Fourteenth; schemes which indeed for a while Providence permitted to astonish all Europe; while a young and an artful prince with vast revenues, able ministers, accomplished generals, and the thorough confidence of his people, thought of nothing less than universal monarchy, yet did this very monarch, fostered in flattery and vain-glory, and accustomed to success and command, live to see his conquests gradually torn from him, his ablest ministers dead or disgraced, his revenues exhausted, his army spoiled, and himself a sad monument of the vanity of earthly ambition, and the folly of unjust desires.

————— valet ima summis
Mutare, & insignem attenuat Deus.

HORACE.

WHO can reflect without horror upon the exploits of Julius Cæsar (as much as his character may be admired by the children of violence) who boasted that his conquests in Gaul only had cost more than twelve hundred thousand lives. And in the modern methods of destruction, let men, if they can bear the dreadful picture, imagine to themselves the ruin of springing a mine, or of a sea-fight; the plundering, stripping, burning and destroying, that generally attend the sacking of a town, and then say, whether a war, followed by such miseries, can be entered into without
absolute

absolute necessity, especially by a disciple of the meek and holy Jesus the *prince of peace*: and however the characters of the advisers of such wars may be embellished by servile wits and misplaced eloquence, they must be condemned by all true philosophy and religion. Very unhappy would this nation be in its king and parliament, if they have laid upon it the burden of great guilt and great expence in the same thing; if they have imposed upon it heavy taxes in order to furnish out a complete armament, and by that very management have highly offended the Lord of Hosts. But here we will trust nothing has been done amiss, the bare act of numbering men for an army can carry in itself no more guilt than numbering so many sheep for the slaughter. David, who lived under the peculiar guardianship of Divine Providence, ought to have waited for God's council, what he should do, what management he should use to repel his enemies, what number of forces he should carry out to battle. But the dispensation of God's providence is otherwise with us. We have no *Seers* to attend our king, to bring him premonitions from heaven; we have no *Urim* nor *Thummim*, we have no *Visions* whereby to discover what the mind of God is, and consequently there is room for human councils. To defend our gracious sovereign in the maintenance of his just and lawful rights, by raising a due number of proper forces, is so far from being a sin against Providence, that it would be a very blameable abuse of Providence not to apply those means which God hath put in our power, so long as force opposeth force. Such was the dispensation of God in protecting his chosen people, for reasons best known to himself, that the king of Israel might possess his soul in peace and his kingdom in safety, though never so superior a force were led against him. One of the Israelites might chase a thousand. But other kings have no ground for such expectations, either from God's word or from the instances of success which the history of the world affords. And very remarkable to this purpose, our blessed Lord observes the unreasonableness of omitting human precaution in such case. What king, says he, going to make

war:

war against another king, sitteth not down first and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand.—So that to charge any prince now with iniquity who has numbered his people for a just war, and to transfer to him the crime here charged upon this account on David king of Israel, would be a great abuse of this passage of the Bible history. But does it then suggest no admonition to modern nations? Yes surely; a distrust of God's *general providence* would be as much a crime in us, as a distrust of his *particular providence* was in the Israelites.

SHOULD we in our present circumstances make flesh our arm, and become forgetful of God's supreme disposal, we then should have just reason to fear his vengeance. Even now the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong. Nothing less than infinite wisdom can have an absolute command over the affairs of human life. The highest degree of it which men can possess, is by no means equal to the many hazards which in war especially are to be met with. We may be sure then that arrogance and conceitedness of our own abilities are highly displeasing to that great Being, who delights in an humble mind, and by several of his dispensations seems purposely to shew men that mere *human schemes* are vain and ineffectual. This was the opinion of that illustrious princess *Queen Elizabeth* in the case of a war with Spain; as during the preparation for the defence of England, she took all imaginable care to shew that whatever strength the nation afforded, yet her main reliance was upon God, who was then first devoutly sought unto by solemn prayer and supplication. So after the defeat of the *Armada*, which the pope in the *spirit of his infallibility* had pronounced *invincible*, she ascribed the wonderful success to the bounty of heaven. It is much to the honour of that princess, to observe the different construction which she and the king of Spain put upon this extraordinary event: the king of Spain, to lessen her glory, ascribed the ruin of his fleet rather to the violence of storms and tempests,

tempests, than to the bravery of the English: but the Queen, instead of looking upon it as a diminution of her honour, valued herself upon this signal favour of heaven; and accordingly ordered a medal to be struck, representing a fleet beaten by a tempest, with that truly religious inscription, *Deus afflavit et dissipantur.*

I NEED not insist any longer on this point, perhaps what I have said may seem too much: it may be objected, it is needless to put us in mind that the nation, with all its provisions for war, is still to trust to Providence; that without the divine aid, the wisest councils of frail men, and the multitude of an host, and all the instruments of war are but weak and vain; that we are not to confide in the splendor of any thing that is great, or in the stability of any thing that is strong here below. But upon what doth St. James charge mens' heavy disappointments?

YE lust and have not, ye kill, and desire to have and cannot obtain; ye fight and war, yet ye have not because ye ask not; ye ask and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.

If then there be a providence influencing the condition of nations, and if this providence expresseth itself in blessing a good and afflicting a wicked people, the point remaining to be considered is this very important one, What ground have we of this land to look for the divine protection? Are we that innocent, virtuous and pious people, that we may certainly reckon upon God's favour? We must own, that we are far from such a character. It is grievous to dwell on this subject, but it is become necessary, in order to enliven our zeal for reformation, to recollect some of the public sins which reign amongst us.

Is not public corruption, by the sophistry of some modern writers, not only excused, but held up, avowed, and defended as a necessary instru-

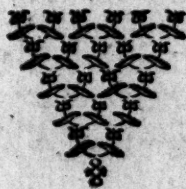
ment of government ? Is not that solemn appeal to God as a witness and avenger, which is always implied in the taking an oath, treated as a traditional form of common business ? Is not the Lord's day neglected and profaned as if it were superstition to observe it ? Is not the ordinance of the blessed sacrament, that communion for which our forefathers endured so many fiery trials, almost forgotten in its genuine acceptation, while it is retained as little more than a civil ceremony, as a necessary though obsolete qualification for offices in the state ? Is it not become a fashion, a mark of a polite education in England, for men to expose the scheme of revealed religion as a fable and imposture, to refuse prayer to the God that made them, to despise the merits of Christ who redeemed them, and to laugh at the influence of the Holy Ghost, whose office it is to sanctify the souls of men.

In this universal profligacy can we look up with any reasonable confidence for national blessings ? Can we hope to escape the fate of so many empires, whom luxury, pride, irreligion, boasted strength, and real weakness have made a prey to new conquerors, to the strong man and the spoiler ? Perhaps 'ere long, these sacred walls, which the piety of our forefathers have erected, will be the last retreats of what little learning and religion may be left amongst us ; while the ravages of war fill every other place with horror and desolation : it is to us therefore that it is more especially a duty to inculcate upon the minds of the rising generation, who are to be our future legislatures and ministers, just sentiments of the value of those important blessings which the excellence of our free constitution, once so admired by all Europe, holds up to us, and which it depends on our own virtue and public spirit to preserve inviolate ; to oppose a wholesome antidote to that pernicious poison, with which artful sceptics and hireling sophisters endeavour to corrupt our integrity, and undermine our principles, to debase us, to render us servile, and to extinguish in our minds

minds that generous ardour for freedom, which has so long been the praise of the individuals of this country, and the glory of the nation.

LET us hope, but let us also endeavour every one of us, by the setting right of our own minds, under the guidance of the divine spirit of truth, to avert the national calamities which seem to threaten us. If there is any faith in God's promises, let us look up for his protection, let us seek it with hearts pure and uncorrupted, without narrow, partial, and selfish views; let us perform the duties of christian men and faithful citizens, lest this our land be turned into a field of blood, it's name changed, and we become a hissing and reproach to strangers.

F I N I S.



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and we become a nation and a people to its praise.

